DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 017 SP 026 617

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TITLE Teaching Demands and Adaptive Curriculum Management.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Strategies; High Schools; *Instructional Development; Secondary School Teachers; Teaching Experience; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A qualitative case study was designed to explore the work experience of six high school English teachers. Teachers were observed over a five month period. No formal, systematic rating scale or observation instruments were used; the observer relied upon his experience as a high school teacher and on specialized training in curriculum theory and qualitative research methodology. Written documents, such as course syllabi, were also collected, and interviews with the teachers were conducted. This paper presents an "educational criticism" of ways in which the teachers organized and planned their work. The observer felt that the teachers continually strove to find work strategies which struck a balance between the bureaucratic and ethical demands of teaching. It is concluded that school policies designed to support instruction need to be based not on the tasks teachers perform, but on improved understanding of how teachers experience their work. (CB)

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ED262017

Teaching Demands and Adaptive Curriculum Management

This paper describes a qualitative case study designed to explore the work experience of six high school English teachers. In order to clarify the focus of this study, let me begin by quoting one of these teachers as he describes his work.

> Among my five classes now, I would say I enjoy on a very warm basis four of them. But there is one that kind of bothers me, and it's because of a few individuals. I have to learn to control that too...I guess my tolerance is liberal, but I know where to draw the line. Just like if I were in a lifeboat and someone jeopardized those in the boat. I would have to maybe get rid of somebody in order to save the lifeboat. I would hate to be faced with that decision.

Now imagine for a moment that this lifeboat metaphor was our only basis for characterizing the circumstances of teaching. Adrift on the open seas, conditions are adverse, resources limited, the possibilities of rescue uncertain. Our most immediate concern is day-to-day survival--the practical business of staying afloat, rationing resources, maintaining order. As deceptive as metaphors can be, this scenario compels us to consider not only the constraints of the classroom, but also the nature of decision-making mandated by these constraints. Regardless of its necessity, the decision to push someone overboard is an inhumane decision. What is its effect on the person who must decide? In deciding, do they abardon a part of their own humanity? Must teachers also abandon part of their humanity in order to keep the classroom afloat?

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These questions represent the basic concerns that have motivated my research. Foremost, they center on understanding how teachers experience their work--a question which has led me to focus my topic on the structural demands and practical constraints of secondary teaching. The plan for this paper is to briefly outline my conceptual framework and research methodology, identify two general types of teaching demands, and consider their relationship to patterns of curricular decision-making.

At the 1965 American Educational Research Association meeting held in Chicago, Philip Jackson reported on a study of elementary classrooms in which he found that teachers engage in as many as 1000 interpersonal interactions each day.(1) His observation suggests what teachers recognize intuitively--the immediacy of the teaching situation and the need for rapid, flexible decision-making. In Life in Classrooms, published three years later, Jackson characterizes the teacher as gatekeeper, supply sergeant, traffic manager, and offical timekeeper in describing activities which are all responsive to the conditions of the elementary classroom.(2)

In the twenty years since Jackson made his report in Chicago, classroom researchers have become increasingly concerned with understanding the teacher's work experience. Perhaps this concern has been motivated in part by the steady increase in teacher job dissatisfaction.(3) But for whatever the reasons, this growing interest has helped focus attention on the shared conditions and dilemmas of the teaching profession. Dan Lortie's work, for example, points to the isolated nature of the teacher's world, and the fundamental uncertainty involved with an occupation which essentially has no "bottom line."(4) Recent studies conducted by the Boston Women's Teachers' Group explore a range of work dilemmas experienced by elementary teachers.(5) Reflecting Jackson's earlier research, this group associates these dilemmas with inflexible

curriculum requirements, narrowly defined teacher evaluation procedures, and pervasive institutional norms which stress the comparative worth of both teachers and students. Theodore Sizer has identified similar points of conflict in the work experience of high school teachers.(6) Central to his analysis is the use of bureaucratic authority in ways which consistently devalue the teacher's professional judgment.

While teachers have never enjoyed full professional status, Dan Duke argues that changing conditions of work have now made teaching an almost "impossible" job.(7) To support this claim, Duke cites a variety of research which indicates that complex social changes have created a situation where teachers must now confront a growing number of legislative constraints, higher job insecurity and task ambiguity, rising student apathy, little guidance from higher education, increasing public criticism, and declining financial support. Together with these trends he finds increasing expectations that our schools play a central role in solving social problems and paving the way for future generations. In short, Duke argues that now, more than ever before, teachers are being asked to "do more with less." Reports such as these suggest that concern for the viability of the teaching profession has reached a critical point. Nevertheless, classroom research is only just beginning to provide insight into how teachers experience their work, and how this experience relates to the quality of instruction they are able to provide.

The study reported here was designed to explore what teachers learn, explicitly and implicitly, from the conditions under which they teach. School and classrooms, however, are characterized by a bewildering variety of factors which influence what teachers do and how they feel about what they do. In developing a conceptual framework from which to consider the circumstances of teaching, I have relied heavily on Michael Lipsky's theory of street-level

bureaucracy.(8) This theory attempts to locate the place of the individual within institutional settings where public service workers interact directly with clients and have substantial discretion in determining precisely how this interaction takes place. The work environment in street-level bureaucracies tends to be characterized by inadequate resources, vague or ambiguous agency goals, unclear criteria for evaluating worker performance, and nonvoluntary clients. The dilemma of the street-level bureaucrat is one of having considerable responsibility for promoting social values, yet little external support or guidance for carrying out their work. In order to cope with this situation, street-level bureaucrats develop adaptive work strategies such as rationing services, controlling clients, modifying goals, and routinizing procedures. While these work strategies are aimed at "processing" clientele, the work of street-level bureaucrats is not "bureaucratic" in the sense of being impersonal and detached. Rather, street-level bureaucrats are often required to make critical decisions about people who react to those decisions with anger, joy, dismay, or gratitude.

By suggesting the adaptive nature of work strategies, Lipsky's theory provides a conceptual link between the teaching environment and curricular decision-making. From this perspective, curriculum can be seen as one of the ways by which teachers organize their work in response to teaching demands. High school teachers, for example, faced with five or six successive classes of thirty students each are likely to use textbooks and worksheets not only to promote student learning, but also as survival mechanisms for coping with their daily schedule.

The demands of teaching can be located in work conditions which limit or narrow the teacher's options in defining problems and establishing work procedures. These conditions include broad parameters of work such as the availability of classroom resources, the teacher's caseload, and the time

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available to teachers for managing instructional activities. These aspects of teaching can be defined largely independent of how teachers experience them. To do so, however, would tell us little about why teachers act and think the way they do. As Seymour Sarason notes, "The experience of work is comprised of people, events, and relationships far afield, in a literal sense, from the physical arena of work."(9) Sarason's view recognizes that the occupational milieu of teaching is not an "objective reality." Rather, as Bo Hedberg argues, the work environment exists to some degree inside the individual, created and recreated through the filtering and processing of information.(10)

For this reason, my research design and methodology is aimed at gaining access to the experience of individual teachers. The procedures of the study involved observations and interviews with six English teachers at two high schools. One of these schools serves an upper-middle class community, while the other serves primarily a working class population. My observations took the form of shadowing each teacher for five consecutive days. Shadowing is a term borrowed from career education and refers to the practice of following an individual throughout their work day. It is justified as a method of study on the grounds of providing a unique perspective from which to consider the nature of work in a given occupation.

The six teachers I shadowed represent neither the superstars nor the misfits of their profession. Their ages range from 27 to 67, and, as a group, they are responsible for roughly 700 students a day. In an effort to make sense out of how these teachers experience their work, I have relied on educational connoisseurship and educational criticism, a type of qualitative inquiry developed by Elliot Eisner.(11) This approach encourages subtle forms of discernment in making classroom observations. While shadowing teachers, I did not rely on systematic rating scales or pre-formulated observation

instruments. Neither did I enter the schools with only a pen and notebook. Rather, I brought to my observations experience as a high school teacher together with specialized training in both curriculum theory and qualitative research methodology.

Overall, I spent more than 200 hours over a period of five months with the participating teachers. During this time I collected written documents such as course syllabi, conducted interviews with a variety of school personnel, and took field notes related to the classroom use of text materials, assignments, presentation techniques, and student evaluation procedures. This information I am now using to write a series of educational criticisms. These criticisms are intended to provide the basis for a thematic analysis of teaching demands and related patterns of curriculum management. Although still at an early stage, this analysis indicates two general types of demands common to the work situations of the teachers I observed. I will refer to these two types of demands as bureaucratic and ethical. Bureaucratic demands include activities related to both instruction and general "housekeeping." These activities range widely from recording attendance to planning lessons, writing exams, making class presentations, correcting assignments, and assigning grades. The teacher's responsibilities in these areas are based on rules prescribed by law, school policy, or professional norms. Ethical demands, in contrast, move beyond academic and custodial concerns. These demands are not governed or defined by rules, but arise from the daily contact between teachers and students. The nature of this contact is to some degree personal, and it fosters a type of natural feeling, what Nel Noddings refers to as an "inner imperative," which urges the teacher to recognize and confirm the student as a capable and valuable person.(12) Among the teachers I observed, this ethical dimension of their work represented not so much an ideal as it did a practical orientation to getting along with people.

At this point, let me provide two examples of how teachers organize their work in an effort to meet these two types of demands. The first example concerns the use of seat-work. In designing classroom activities, the teachers I observed often built into their lessons a block of time, generally ranging from ten to thirty minutes, during which students were expected to work on their own with minimal teacher supervision. Some of these short in-class assignments were well integrated with ongoing instruction; others were not. Regardless of their educational function, however, these assignments freed time which the teachers used for interacting with individual students. This interaction was often non-academic and represented one of the few opportunities in the teachers' daily schedule for them to maintain contact with their students on a somewhat personal level. Several teachers I spoke with were well aware of using this work strategy. One commented,

> It's nice to talk one-to-one, and it helps break the mannequin-like image of me standing up in front of the room. It really pays tremendous dividends--allows them to ask questions, and I find out a lot. Some students won't say anything in class, but sitting eye-to-eye we can talk.

Maintaining some level of personal contact with students seems to be critical to the teacher's work orientation. When I asked teachers to identify their major sources of professional satisfaction, all six mentioned this particular aspect of their work.

My second example concerns the nature of teacher planning. On one hand, the teachers I observed were rarely disorganized or unprepared when they entered their classrooms. To some degree, all six teachers relied on well established routines, particularly in the use of text materials and assignments. On the other hand, I found the formalities of curriuclum planning

almost completely absent. Written lesson plans, for example, either were not used or were likely to consist of brief outlines hastily sketched on the back of a department memo ten minutes before class. On Tuesday, lessons for Thursday or Friday seemed to be blocked out half in the teacher's mind and half in cryptic notes scattered across their desk or paper clipped to the back cover of their roll book. In discussing plans for a particular class, one teacher told me, "I'm not as well organized as some teachers; I don't think I could be. What I do often depends on how the group comes in at the beginning of the period." This rather loosely structured approach to organization turned out to be a highly adaptive work strategy which provided some degree of flexibility for coping with the uncertainties of classroom life. Indeed, these teachers were likely to regard flexibility as an indication of professional competence.

At least in part, these examples reflect an effort to find work strategies which strike a balance between the bureaucratic and ethical demands of teaching. This is sometimes a difficult process because these two types of demands require somewhat different approaches to instruction. Bureaucratic demands urge teachers to routinize work procedures, while ethical demands call for flexibility and a case-by-case approach to decision-making. These dimensions of teaching also hold somewhat different implications for designing educational programs and school policy. For example, schools designed to facilitate the teacher's ability to meet the ethical demands of their profession would certainly look different from the particular schools I visited. Teachers would likely have time built into their daily schedules for interacting with individual students. They would also be likely to see fewer students for longer periods of time during their work day.

The broader implications of my research suggest that school policy designed to support instruction will need to be based not on the tasks teachers perform, but on an improved understanding of how teachers experience their

work. Such an understanding, in turn, will require a great deal of sensitivity to the expectations teachers hold regarding their own autonomy and personal well-being.

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